



Ismé Bennie. Freshers' Flick 1957 - an initiation rite.

Memories of Sunnyside I

Reading in the January 2012 issue about Sunnyside - still Lady Isabel Dalrymple House to me - evoked memories of the four years I spent there in the late '50s, so many lifetimes ago. What was life like in a women's residence then?

I had no sooner unpacked than I was summoned to the front door. There was no intercom system then, nor phones in the rooms.

Maids did door duty in the day time, and first-year students had to do it on a rotation basis nights and weekends. You were fetched to meet with your visitor or date. If it was a male, he never got beyond reception.

One of the second-year guys from my hometown had come to say hello and to check out the new crop of arrivals. He came from the men's residence a few hundred yards away. In those first months we shared several activities with the men's residence: an "exchange" dance, when we trooped over to be selected by the new men as dinner partners; a very demeaning experience, particularly if you were one of the last to be chosen. We also got together with the men for a concert of sorts. I remember performing to Green Door. Before all of this though, we had initiation - dressing up in weird clothing

and marching in pairs with the freshmen. We were called freshettes.

Accommodation was handed out based on academic success. I did well in Matric so had a room of my own. There was no such thing as "en suite". Bathrooms and showers and toilets were down the hall. Rooms were minimal. Today dorms have mini-fridges and microwaves and television sets and other accoutrements. In those days South Africa did not have television! The rooms were cleaned by maids and they changed the linen every week. They were under the supervision of the matrons, who took care of the daily running of the place.

We ate in a communal dining room. Breakfast and lunch were casual, but dinner started on time and we wore academic gowns, and for formal dinners, a white dress under the gown. Food was institutional, not horrible, but often included grey slices of roast for dinner. We had tea in a common room every afternoon, with nice cake. My mother sent cookies regularly. We would walk up the hill to pick up sausage and other goodies from a German deli. In fourth year we often picnicked in the garden rather than go in to dinner.

Being in residence made attending early morning classes easier: we rolled up our pyjama pants under a coat, and off we

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went. The swimming pool was almost at the door, for an afternoon's reading in the sun.

In our first few months, lectures were organised for us, some on sex education. There were still young women who needed to know where babies came from. We came from all over southern Africa, many of us from small towns or rural communities, some of us from public schools, some from private schools, others from convents.

Our residence had its own float, for Rag [Remember and Give]. Does Rag still exist? [No. - Ed.] It was a fund-raiser. We decorated trucks for a carnival-like procession through the city. I was on a float with the Rag Queen and her princesses, one who almost became the wife of a US President, had John Kerry only won.

The phone system was basic. There was a bank of public phones, four I think. They were manned by the maids during the day and by first-year students the rest of the time, who fetched you to the phone. The corridors were long and spread out, so by the time you reached the phone, the caller might be long gone.

We had Res Dances twice a year. One invited a date. The invitation process - asking or receiving a reply - was stressful. Bedrooms at the front of the building were set aside for small groups and dancing took place in the dining room. Punch was made in the Matron's bathtub. One year a couple of women came as a pair, one dressed in a man's suit. It was quite the talk!

There was a curfew system. One had to be in by 8PM

most nights, could only be out later a certain number of nights per week. Saturday night was the big going out night. Going out nights required permission from the assistant dean, at one time Liz Hyslop (who later became my classmate in Library Science) or the Dean, in my day, Mrs Bieshevel. One signed in and out, and being late was a serious offence. As we progressed through the years, the rules became much more flexible.

Romance was rife, engagements happened. Many of us stayed until we graduated. Then we went on to new lives, to chosen careers, and many of us to other countries.

Ismé Bennie (BA, 1960), Toronto

Memories of Sunnyside II

Your lovely photos and article on Sunnyside in the January issue of *WITSReview* brought back a flood of memories. I was "in res" at Sunnyside from 1967 to 1969. Thelma Henderson was the Dean of Sunnyside then.

From Monday to Thursday we had "formal dinner" every evening at 7PM. There was a roster for three or four girls to have sherry with the Dean in her flat before formal dinner and each girl's turn came around about twice a year. At dinner academic gowns had to be worn over dresses, with shoes and stockings. We stood behind our chairs until the Dean had said grace and were not allowed to leave until the meal was over and those at "top table" had filed out. If you were late and those at top table had already taken their seats, you were not allowed in and would miss dinner. Sometimes we did this

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deliberately. The waiters who served us at all meals were not allowed to tell us what was on the menu for that evening, but we had a chum by the name of Lucky who would sometimes tell us on the quiet. What we tried hard to avoid was “flat red” (corned beef) which was not a favourite. On those evenings we missed dinner we would buy some junk food from the res tuck shop which opened for 15 minutes at 9PM most nights or, if we were feeling flush, we’d wander over to Pop’s café on Empire Road and buy a takeaway, or even share a salad at the restaurant in the Total Centre.

As a special concession, we were allowed to come to lunch on Saturday in our curlers (getting ready for Saturday evening dates was a serious business), although they had to be modestly covered with a scarf. Pantyhose were just coming into fashion then and we had a tough time learning how to put them on!

The photo of the beautiful wrought iron balustrades reminded me of the annual Sunnyside dance. All decked out in our long formal dresses, we’d have to wait in the corridor on the top floor at the head of the front stairs for our names to be called individually, signalling the arrival of our dance partner, and then descend the stairs to meet him and introduce him to the Dean and Vice-Dean. Usually Maggie called us; she was mostly in charge of the entrance at Sunnyside and was much loved by the girls. Later in the dining hall cleared specially for the dance, we really whooped it up to the music of the Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel, etc.

In my first year my room facing Empire Road was

very tiny. Most first-years had to share a room, but I was lucky because I was a little older, having taken a gap year (then not known as one) before coming to Wits. In my second year I chose a very large room, which proved, however, to be terribly cold. In my third year I chose a room on the top floor at the front, with windows looking south and west. It seemed ideal until I discovered that I would be woken every weekday morning at 5am by a tremendous noise and clatter as the rubbish bins were emptied right below my room! As soon as I could I moved to a vacant room in “music row”, facing north and with a view over Sunnyside’s lovely gardens. Outside my window was a narrow balcony with discreet washing lines for the girls’ laundry (we did this ourselves by hand), where a good deal of now-unfashionable sunbathing also went on.

I enjoyed my years at Sunnyside and did not at all resent the few restrictions we had, such as having to be back in res by certain times. A friend and I did spend one night illegally away from res when the party we’d been attending off campus ended too late. We sneaked back the next morning early before breakfast and were never found out.

They were politically active years too - that could not escape anyone’s notice - and many of my acquaintances were arrested by the police. I was a reporter for *Wits Student* for a while and was relied on to type for the newspaper, a skill I had picked up in my gap year. The *Wits Student* offices were close to Sunnyside.

By the way, we did have a Chinese girl in res with us. She was studying law and came from Pretoria.

Beverlie Davies (née Fuchs) (BA 1970), Pretoria